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Dancing for the King of Congo from Early Modern Central Africa to Slavery-Era Brazil

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Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, men and women of African origins or heritage, living in freedom or enslaved in Iberian cities of Europe or the Americas, staged elaborate festivals around the election of a royal court dressed, crowned, and organized in the European fashion. Authorities on both shores of the Atlantic sanctioned the celebrations as innocuous popular festivities appropriately framed and tamed, they believed, within the dominant European civic and religious order. The festivals, after all, emulated European pageantry and took place within the purview of the Church, demonstrating, the white establishment thought, its successful catechization and Europeanization of the displaced Africans.

Elegant studies of medieval and early modern popular festivals exposed the naïveté of these governing bodies' positions. If carnivals, charivaris, and world-upside-downs worked to some extent to reinforce the established order, their ephemeral pomp also lastingly challenged authorities (Davis 1975; Le Roy Ladurie 1979; Bakhtin 1984). The festivals celebrating black kings and queens in the early modern Atlantic world in general and in Brazil in particular were no different and afforded a limited space of resistance and social power to enslaved and free black men and women.

The impact of the black kings' festivals on the societies within which they emerged and the empowerment their participants derived from their organization are increasingly well understood thanks to a swelling wave of studies about the events' social significance, and political influence.¹ A close correlation between the festivals and groups who claimed identities connected to west central Africa also emerged from this scholarship (Souza 2002; Lara 2007). Yet the nature of this connection remains obscure for lack of specific points of comparisons between the Iberian performances and practices in Africa. I propose here to consider a prominent ritual performance from the early modern central African kingdom of Kongo called *sangamento* (Fromont 2011b) as a key background for the black kings festivals.

Dancing for the king of Kongo in the *sangamentos*, or honoring ephemeral black kings in Brazil, men and women of central African origins or heritage ostentatiously mixed African and European regalia and pageantry to express and enact independent conceptions of collective identity, political power, and social unity.²

History of the Elections

Since the fifteenth century, African men and women living free or enslaved in Europe and the Americas have gathered in organized groups under the guidance of their chosen leaders.³ In late medieval Portugal, and later in colonial Brazil, Catholic lay confraternities often provided the setting for the gatherings, within the space of relative freedom that the Church afforded the members of the diaspora (Tinhorão 1988, 122–34). The African residents of Lisbon, for instance, assembled in the Brotherhood of the Rosary beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century (Lahon 2001, 344–51). At first, they worshipped in the sodality alongside white members, but soon formed an independent entity that outsiders could already recognize in the last decades of the fourteen hundreds. They formalized the statutes of a separate, exclusively black association in 1565, the *Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Homens Pretos* or Confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary of the Black Men (Saunders 1982, 151). Sodalities following this model rapidly multiplied in the Portuguese Atlantic and became one of the principal spaces of organized socialization among members of the African diaspora. The groups received the approval of European administrations and thrived in the public sphere, in contrast to other significant African collectives such as maroon polities or secret gatherings at the margins of plantation and urban life that functioned surreptitiously and against the law (Schwartz 1992).

Within the confraternities and, on occasion, in the other contexts, formal elections brought forward chosen members to serve in functions named after European aristocratic and administrative titles such as king, queen, prince, duke, judge, and majordomo. The earliest election recorded in the Portuguese Atlantic took place in 1563 in the surroundings of Lisbon.⁴ Two years later, in 1565, the Black Brotherhood of the Rosary outlined formal rules in its statutes for the nomination of a king (Mulvey 1980, 162). Outside the sodalities, but still in the orbit of the Church, leaders also appeared in sixteenth century Lisbon as *maiores*. These so-called principals represented in 1587 the different African ethnic groups or nations of the capital under twelve banners with a mandate to negotiate with European clerics the organization of catechization, festivities, and worship among their peers (Lahon 2003, 141).

In parallel to, and probably also in conjunction with the elections, Africans in Portugal staged spectacular festivals, which, by 1559, had reached a size and intensity that caused them to be temporarily banned from the city limits of Lisbon (Saunders 1982, 106). Festive elections appeared almost contemporaneously in Portuguese and Spanish America, within decades of the establishment of Iberian colonial rule and of the arrival of enslaved men and women from Africa. Documents from 1573 commented on elections in Cartagena de Indias, an observation confirmed in notes

from 1693 that referred to the events as age-old traditions (Thornton 1992, 203). Notices of great festive elections of black kings increased in the seventeenth century both in provincial Portuguese towns such as Vila Viçosa in 1639 (Cadornega 1982, 28–29), and Elvas in 1643 and 1656 (Vieira 1999, 85), or overseas, in Recife in 1664 (Tinhorão 2000, 88), Olinda in 1666 (Rennefort 1688, 208–9) or in Príncipe Island at the turn of the next century (Agostinho 1707, 1:265–67, 5:445–46). Kings also emerged among rebel groups, the other significant context of African organization on the American continent. In Mexico, for instance, the news of the election of kings among Africans periodically terrified Spaniards. Juan de Torquemada reported for example how, in 1609, ‘agitation and rumor about a black rebellion’ shook the Spanish establishment with news that ‘in the night of the Kings [i.e. epiphany] many [blacks] joined together in one place, and elected a King and others to titles of Dukes and Counts’ (Torquemada 1615, 833).

In the eighteenth century, the practice spread and administrative efforts to control the manifestations extended, leaving a denser archival trail in both Brazil (Antonil 1711, 28; Kiddy 2005, 161, 162, 169; Mulvey 1980, 115–16; Reginaldo 2005, 130, 132, 134) and Portugal (Lahon 2003, 143–44). Documents of that period also began to consistently record the ethnic affiliation of the elected leaders. They used the vague term of *nação* or nation that originally referred to the location from which enslaved people embarked in Africa, but became ubiquitous, operative, and widely used categories in Portugal and Brazil both as administrative terms and as identifiers that Africans themselves used. Although kings and queens of several nations reigned, the great majority belonged to groups associated with west central Africa—a region on the southern Atlantic coast of the continent, spanning across today’s Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola. In turn, confraternities whose members identified with a nation linked to that area elected more kings and queens than any other groups (Reginaldo 2005, 136). This correlation demonstrates that the collective identity (Karasch 1987; Reis 1996), political organization (Souza 2002), and religious views (Soares 2000; Reginaldo 2011) enacted in the festivals held a strong connection to central Africa.

African Precedents: *Sangamentos* of the Christian Kongo

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade linked Portugal, Brazil, and central Africa in closely interconnected networks of commerce, religion, and cultural exchange. People, goods, and ideas circulated between the three poles in heavy streams fostered by Portugal’s colonial ambitions first in Brazil and later, Angola. In establishing and managing its strongholds in the southern Atlantic, Portugal encountered powerful, centralized polities in west central Africa, first among which the Kingdom of Kongo. Portuguese explorers and clerics reached the kingdom for the first time in 1483. In the first decade of contact, Kongo and Portugal exchanged hostages, dispatched embassies, and established a cordial diplomatic relationship. In 1491, the Kongo monarch demanded to receive baptism and initiated the conversion of his realm. The nascent Church blossomed under the leadership of

his son and successor Afonso, who imposed Christianity as the kingdom's state religion and ably combined Christian thought and Kongo worldview. The official adoption of the new faith was met with a mix of enthusiasm and opposition, but it soon prevailed and opened a new era in the history of central Africa, defined by the region's involvement in the commercial, political, and religious networks of Christendom and the Atlantic World. The nature of the Kongo people's relationship with Christianity is the subject of a lively scholarly debate (Hilton 1985; MacGaffey 1994; Thornton 1994; Sweet 2003). If conversion in the modern sense of sincere change of heart does not appropriately describe the role that Christianity played in the Kongo, it is clear that new beliefs, political discourses, and social forms emerged in the region as a result of its people's long and transformative engagement with the new religion. Through centuries of dense history marked by the profoundly transformative effects of civil and foreign wars and of the slave trade, Christianity remained a prominent trait of central African political and religious life (Fromont, forthcoming 2014).

During that period, elite men from the kingdom of Kongo periodically staged ritual martial exercises known as *sangamentos*, a lusitanized word derived from the Kikongo language verb *kusanga* that evokes the joyful and spectacular jumps and leaps executed during the performance. The dance, in its early modern version illustrated in Figure 1, drew, as did its name, from both local and foreign sources,



Figure 1 Bernardino d'Asti, *The Missionary Gives his Blessing to the Mani during Sangamento*, ca 1750, watercolor on paper, 19.5 × 28 cm. Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin, MS 457, f. 18 (photograph © Settore Sistema bibliotecario urbano della Città di Torino).

which it integrated and transfigured into an entirely new form. The ritual performances accompanied the periodic payment of tribute and pledges of allegiance from vassals to overlords, celebrating and enacting the political hierarchy in place. In the Kongo's Christian era, *sangamentos* consisted of ritual battles that reenacted the two successive foundations of the kingdom, first, in the distant past, by Lukeni, the original civilizing hero of Kongo oral history, and then by Afonso, the realm's first great Christian ruler (Fromont 2011b). The later formulated this second founding narrative in a series of letters to the Pope and to his own vassals redacted around 1512 (Brásio 1952, 1: docs 68–72). Son of the first Kongo king to enter in contact with the Portuguese, Afonso had been educated by European clerics and had become a talented scholar of Church history and the Gospels. He put this knowledge to work to construct a narrative of the advent of Christianity in his kingdom that not only successfully and durably integrated the new faith into the Kongo's own history and mythology but also inscribed the conversion of the realm in the history of the Church.

Sangamentos ritually reenacted this narrative in which Afonso appeared as the successor of Lukeni, i.e. another founding hero ushering the kingdom into a new era in which political legitimacy and prestige now derived from Christianity and the new forms of access it offered to the invisible forces controlling the visible world. In turn, the story also inscribed the advent of Christianity in the Kongo within the history of Christendom at large. The dances' first part reenacted the creation of the kingdom by Lukeni; the second act staged Afonso's later Christian foundation of the realm in a battle against his brother who opposed the new faith and in which the Catholic prince prevailed thanks to the miraculous intercession of Saint James. Afonso's story called upon the *topos* of a battle against heathenry and of the miraculous support of the warrior saint in a reformulation of Portugal's national gest that featured Saint James and the founding king of Portugal as divinely sanctioned heroes who triumphed together against the Moors in the *Reconquista* (Seixas 1996). Afonso also reported the apparition of the Cross of Constantine during the battle that further located his victory within the universal history of the Church, as a repetition of the momentous conversion of the Roman emperor in European antiquity. In keeping with this narrative, the regalia of the kingdom's elite evolved in the sixteenth century to include, alongside local emblems, the insignia of knighthood sported by Saint James and Iberian aristocrats, fit for their new status as Christian nobles. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, iron swords, shields, long capes, and coat of arms featured prominently in the outfits of the Kongo ruling class.

A Capuchin missionary to central Africa painted two watercolors around 1750 that provide eye-witness accounts of Kongo Christian pageantry, in a *sangamento* in Figure 1 and a formal reception in Figure 2. In the first painting, drums, horns, marimbas, and pounding feet accompany the bold gestures of a group of dancers clad in a combination of European-inspired and local regalia. Their acrobatic moves showcase delicate nets of status swinging down their shoulders, raffia wrappers moving around their legs, and rectangular shields they sway in the air, all locally made emblems of power and prestige. Their large iron swords and the red cloak on



Figure 2 Bernardino d'Asti, *The Missionary Is welcomed by a Soba or Mani*, ca 1750, watercolor on paper, 19.5 × 28 cm. Biblioteca Civica Centrale, Turin, MS 457, f. 13 (photograph © Settore Sistema bibliotecario urbano della Città di Torino).

the back of their leader stem in contrast from European aristocratic attire. At the head of the troop, the ruler presents his respect to the Capuchin friar, to the church, and to the image of the Virgin on its façade. A Kongo status cap, a colorful wrapper of imported fabric, and a red coat of the Order of Christ clearly indicate his social and political status as a member of the Kongo Christian elite. On the one hand, he is a Christian knight, member of an order of knighthood that had been eagerly co-opted by the African Crown from its Portuguese counterpart (L'Hoist 1932) and has access to rare and precious exotic fabrics European traders imported to central Africa from as far as India (Miller 1984). On the other hand, he is a member of the Kongo elite who wears insignia stemming from a local symbolism of power: the shoulder net, the cap enhanced by a feather, and the metal rings around his ankles.

The second watercolor depicts a similar display of Kongo pageantry (Figure 2). In a procession of diplomatic pomp, a provincial ruler greets a missionary and his retinue. Drums, marimbas, trumpets, pluriarcs, and muskets resound in the open space. For the occasion, the ruler, stately shaded by a large crimson umbrella and staff in hand, wears the composite outfit of the Kongo Christian elite. Here as in the first watercolors, local and foreign elements merge and define Kongo Christian regalia, mirroring the political and symbolic message of combination and redefinition enacted in *sangamento* performances.

The fluency with which the central African elite approached and used imported objects, symbols, and mores approximates them to Atlantic Creoles, individuals who served as coastal intermediaries and mediated transactions between Europeans and Africans in the early modern Atlantic (Berlin 1996; Heywood and Thornton 2007). Yet, in this case, the combination does not stem from a strategic response that African Creoles ably crafted to demands, logics, and mechanisms imposed by a European-controlled sphere of commerce and exchange. Rather, it was the visual and symbolic expression of the Kongo elite's inward looking and independent reflection on their conception of power and prestige and the possibilities that a widening world brought to their shores. The elite of the Kongo were not merely conversant with European culture. They engaged with it and embraced some of its aspects on their own terms, articulating European and local thought and imagery in an independent reflection on the nature and visual expressions of Kongo political power, social prestige, and of the invisible forces that sustained them.

This process and its visual manifestations in *sangamentos* and regalia is a crucial background to the festive elections of black kings and queens in Brazil among groups of predominantly central African origin. Men and women of modest extraction, but also members of the Kongo elite captured in the aftermaths of the kingdom's frequent civil wars, made up the American enslaved populations (Heywood 2009). Not only did central Africans bring to the Americas pre-honed abilities to operate within cross-cultural contexts as Atlantic Creoles or simple subjects of a cosmopolitan realm familiar to varying extents with European languages and mores; their political and social identity consisted in great part in the very combination of European and central African symbolism. The articulation of Portuguese- and central African-derived music, clothing, and choreographed pageantry in the black king festivals among central Africans in fact reenacted core conceptions of power, prestige, and legitimacy characteristic of the most influential polity of their region of origin. In other words, on both continents, European visual forms and religious thought served as central African tools of independent reflection and emblems of autonomous definition.

From Kongo to Brazil

Forty years after an Italian friar from Turin painted the central African vignettes in Figures 1 and 2, another young man from the same city, Carlo Giuliani, better known as Carlos Julião, captured in a series of watercolors the elaborate black kings festivals he had observed in Brazil in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Figures 3 to 6). Julião likely never saw d'Asti's missionary handbook, which quietly remained in Capuchin conventual reading rooms; and his own images, now in Rio de Janeiro's National Library, would not circulate either before their entrance in the public collection in 1947 from unknown provenance.⁵ Today, they are grouped in a portfolio compiling dozens of the images Julião composed in the course of his travels as an officer of the Portuguese army deployed in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Julião

likely learned to paint as part of his officer training and exercised his craft in mapmaking and architectural drawings over a long career (Tenreiro 2008). The forty-two watercolors bound together in a volume titled ‘Figures Illustrating the Customs of Whites and Blacks in Rio de Janeiro and the Serro Frio’ in the Biblioteca Nacional join two other similarly sized codexes collecting images under the gloss of ‘Summary Notice of Heathenry in Asia’ for one, and ‘Peruvian Vases and textiles’ for the other.⁶ Although no original titles or text accompany Julião’s Brazilian watercolors, there is little doubt that the festivities he depicted were celebrations staged around the kings and queens of black brotherhoods on the feast day of their patron saint. Julião repeated some of the figures of the series in other works. Cut and pasted scenes and city views arranged and glossed in two large posters now in Lisbon’s *Gabinete de Estudos Arqueológicos de Engenharia Militar* include several characters similar to the ones in Rio. There is no indication that Julião produced the Lisbon panels’ current—and knowledgeable—arrangement and text; nevertheless, the titles convincingly explain the images, identifying for example a scene akin to Figure 3 in the Brazilian corpus as ‘Black Women of the Rosary.’⁷

The four watercolors from the Rio de Janeiro album I consider here depict elaborately attired black dancers in animated processions. In Figure 4, a kingly figure, stately dressed with a long red coat and crimson wrapper, staff in hand, and a dagger at the waist, wears a golden crown on the head, and embroidered anklets. Two young men attend him. One holds a red umbrella above his crowned head and the other



Figure 3 Carlos Julião. ‘Black Women of the Rosary.’ Brazil, last quarter of the 18th century, watercolor on paper. In *Riscos iluminados de figurinhos de brancos e negros dos uzos do Rio de Janeiro e Serro do Frio*, Iconografia C.I.2.8 in the collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



Figure 4 Carlos Julião. 'Black King Festival.' Brazil, last quarter of the 18th century, watercolor on paper. In *Riscos iluminados de figurinhos de brancos e negros dos uzos do Rio de Janeiro e Serro do Frio*, Iconografia C.I.2.8 in the collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

carries his red starred coat. They too are richly dressed with colorful wrappers, anklets, and silver crowns adorned with feathers. Five musicians sporting similar outfits dance and play a combination of central African and European instruments: a marimba, a guitar, a *reco-reco*, a box-like scraper, and a tambourine. A sixth man is pirouetting in the foreground, twirling a staff and castanets in the air. A single female bystander dressed as one of the 'women of the Rosary' stands to the right of the page, taking in the spectacle.

Two other paintings of similar composition depict richly dressed women engaged in performances almost identical to the men's. In Figure 5, a black queen wears a rich European brocade dress, tights and shoes, a golden crown, a scepter and a staff. Two black women serve her, one holding a red umbrella, and the other her long starred crimson cape. These attendants are dressed simply with wrappers at the waist and a sash of yellow fabric across their bare chests. They are barefoot but wear silver anklets, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings along with ribbons and feathers in the hair. Behind this group, five women dance and make music. Two clap their hands to the tune of three others, playing the drum, the scraper, and the marimba. They all wear the same jewels and hairpieces as the attendants, but their wrappers are tied on top of a skirt and shirt and they are shod with fine red boots. In a second vignette not illustrated here, a group of women in fine dresses attend their queen, their heads wrapped in white cloth decorated with flowers. A flute and a trumpet have joined the cast of instruments depicted in the other paintings. On a fifth page, a royal couple, crowned in gold and scepter in hand, walk arm in arm under a blue umbrella, their



Figure 5 Carlos Julião. 'Black Queen Festival.' Brazil, last quarter of the 18th century, watercolor on paper. In *Riscos iluminados de figurinhos de brancos e negros dos uzos do Rio de Janeiro e Serro do Frio*, Iconografia C.I.2.8 in the collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

coat and dress held by three boys (Figure 6). Three other youths playing trumpets and twirling a flag complete the scene. Finally, the 'Black Women of the Rosary' scene shows in addition to the female devotees a young boy in a wrapper and cross-body scarf, ribbons and feathers in the hair, swaying a rectangular shield and an axe (Figure 3). Behind him, the five austere and stately women stand, carrying trays with coin donations in support of the festivities.

Although the painting styles of the two Italian observers are strikingly different, points of comparison between the scenes Julião and d'Asti captured readily arise. On both sides of the Atlantic, similar musical instruments create the soundtrack to which a leader clad in a red coat, a decorated fabric wrapper, and holding a staff or a sword solemnly proceeds. The shield of the young boy in Figure 3 resembles the ones with which Kongo men dance in Figure 1. His circular-shaped axe is characteristically central African, and matches axes from Angola documented in eighteenth century paintings as well as in modern collections (Bassani 1987). The animated attitudes and arm gestures of the attendants seem to carry over from one side to the other. The staff and flag twirling on the Brazilian pages in Figures 4 and 6 echo the awe-inspiring swoops of swords in the first Kongo watercolor. The necklace chains, anklets and bracelets, crosses and medals of the American dancers also recall elements of Kongo elite regalia not depicted in d'Asti's vignettes but recorded in other images and written descriptions.⁸ Note also how the Brazilian male performers wear form-fitting black tops, tights, and shoes, distinct in hue from the brown skin of their hands and face, but successfully giving the illusion of bare chests and legs dressed only with the draped cloth around the waist, collars, and shoes, possibly in reference to the African manner (Figure 7). Other period documents about black king festivals often



Figure 6 Carlos Julião. 'Black King and Queen.' Brazil, last quarter of the 18th century, watercolor on paper. In *Riscos iluminados de figurinhos de brancos e negros dos uzos do Rio de Janeiro e Serro do Frio*, Iconografia C.I.2.8 in the collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

remarked on this type of clothing evoking ideas of African nudity as conceived of in the Western hemisphere.⁹

Bringing these images together highlights visual, gestural, and material resonances that give further substance to the central African dimension of the election and festive celebrations of black kings in Brazil. Point by point correspondences in the regalia, musical instruments, and choreographies deployed in contemporaneous performances on either side of the Atlantic offer an evocative portrait of cultural continuity. The occasion for the Brazilian festivals, the election of a king, further echoes the celebration of mythical and real kings of the *sangamentos*. Precise gestures, objects, and ceremonies travelled with enslaved men and women and took on new life in the Americas. Yet, beyond transfers of single objects or rituals, a significant point of connection between American practices and African precedent resides in the use and articulation of European and African elements as a means for central Africans to express independent thoughts and to respond to social challenges. In the Kongo, the elite strategically combined local and foreign elements into a discourse of power through which they managed the changes brought about by their entrance into the religious, commercial, and political networks of the Atlantic world. The independent and inward-looking combination of local and foreign formed the core of Kongo discourses of political power and social prestige that were expressed in central African regalia and ceremonies such as the *sangamentos*.¹⁰ In turn, in the Americas and Iberia, the black kings festivals that could be seen as subaltern emulations of Iberian political



Figure 7 Carlos Julião. Detail from Figure 4. Brazil, last quarter of the 18th century, watercolor on paper. In *Riscos iluminados de figurinhos de brancos e negros dos uzos do Rio de Janeiro e Serro do Frio*, Iconografia C.I.2.8 in the collections of the Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

pomp, or carnivalesque reversals, also formed a central African response to their radically altered social conditions as enslaved or free members of slavery-era societies. In election festivals, men and women of central African origin or heritage did not simply borrow the regalia and imitate the pageantry of the colonial establishment. They used insignia and ceremonials according to well established and deeply meaningful practices of combination and reconfiguration that characterized the Kongo visual vocabulary of power and prestige. They used European emblems and symbolism as standards of collective identity and tools of social expression. The combination functioned at two levels. First, it recreated the mix of European and African items that already existed in the Kongo. Second, following the combinatory logic honed on the old continent, it operated a further synthesis specific to the new context of enslavement within Europe and colonial Latin America. Black kings festivals and their characteristic regalia, hierarchies, and choreographies testify not only to cultural transmission but also and significantly to epistemological continuity across the Middle Passage.

Becoming Colonial

Francisco Calmon (1762) wrote the most complete description of festivities staged around the figure of a black king in colonial Brazil. His short pamphlet, published shortly after the event, described the celebrations the guilds of the town of Santo Amaro near Salvador da Bahia organized in 1760 on the occasion of the Portuguese Infanta's wedding. Civic festivals honoring the Iberian royal family routinely unfolded in Latin American cities and towns to make visible the power of the ruling elite in the distant metropolises and to enact colonial hierarchies. The pageantry of Santo Amaro included illuminations, equestrian shows, Masses, religious processions, and a range of lay performances. The 'applaudable dance of the Congos' that appeared on four different days stole the show. The goldsmiths, according to Calmon, were the ones who 'presented' the dance. Since people of color could not become members of the guild, the statement left the identity of the dancers unclear. Did the white goldsmiths farcically imitate black festivals? Or did they commission black dancers to stage one of their famed performances? Marina de Mello e Souza and Silvia Lara, who wrote at length about this document, have each argued for a different interpretation. Both scholars rightly insisted that the great fluidity of colonial rules and of their implementation, as well as the flexibility of racial identifications at the time, complicate the question and make its stakes less clear. However, Lara suggested that the white goldsmiths danced themselves, while Mello e Souza argued that they sponsored the dances, while black men and women executed them (Souza 2002, 263; Lara 2007, ch 4). This second interpretation is the most likely but even if the dancers were white goldsmiths, their performances still emulated the familiar pageantry of black festivals. In fact, the appropriation of the Congo dance by a group outside the central African nations would not be unusual. In 1763 Rio de Janeiro, for example, a group identified with the term *pardo*, referring to a racially mixed ancestry, staged a dance 'imitating that of the king of Congo' (Lara 2001, 75). In any case, the Santo Amaro guild's choice to commission this particular set of performances made great marketing sense. The famously excessive pomp and luxury of the coronation festivals provided a perfect showcase for the guild's crafts. Lavish displays of gold and precious stones made the Congo court of Santo Amaro a dazzling sight.

Calmon enthusiastically described the splendid spectacle. On the fourteenth day of the celebrations, the 'ambassador of the King of Congo' entered the town on horseback, clad in blue silk from head to toe. In the fashion of central African elite and just like the head men in Figures 1 and 2, the diplomat wore 'on the shoulders a cape of crimson velvet gallooned with gold,' and white and red feathers on his head. He visited the town's authorities to announce the upcoming visit of his monarchs. Two days later, the king and queen of Congo, accompanied by more than eighty attendants, appeared before the city council:

The king arrived very richly dressed in rich gold thread embroidery enhanced with bright pieces of diamonds. He wore hanging at the waist a beautiful lizard made of the same [gold] thread with such artifice that it looked natural, on the head a gold

crown, in the right hand a scepter and in the left his hat garnished with feathers, [and] doubloons that made him at once rich and showy, on the arms and legs hammered gold manilas, on the shoes [gold] thread embroidery and decorations of shiny diamonds. The cape, which fell from his shoulders, was of crimson velvet and doubled with white cloth with nice flower patterns.¹¹ (Calmon 1762, 12)

Seated on the thrones the council had prepared for them, the royal couple received the respects of their vassals, whom Calmon called ‘sobas,’ a word used in central Africa to refer to mid-level rulers. From their seats, they also presided over several dances identified in the text as *talheiras* and *cucumbís* ‘to the sound of the instruments proper to their use and rite.’ This description is the earliest known mention of the *talheiras* or *taieiras*, a processional dance form associated with black confraternities, the coronation of black kings and queens, and the festival of the Epiphany—or Day of the Kings (Casado 1962, 659–60). It is also an early reference to the *cucumbís*, also known as *cacumbis*, *cucumbe*, or *cucumbre*, a dance specifically associated with central African nations and whose choreography staged a battle between a rightful king and impudent opponents, in the very fashion of the *sangamentos* (Moraes Filho 1901, 167–78). In addition to these dances, the king and queen of Congo watched over another mock battle between Indians and Congos waged with ‘such ardor from each nation that they represented, in their own manner, with much lifelikeness, a vivid image of war.’ The third and fourth outings of the Congo court repeated the processions, dances, and battles (Calmon 1762, 12).

This description deepens the resonances outlined above between Julião’s and d’Asti’s images. The staging of battles between competing African groups within the Congo nation in the *cucumbí* dance and between Indians with bow and arrows and Congo dancers armed with swords in the following act formed a remarkable parallel to the *sangamentos*’ ritual reenactments of the battle between the Kongo Christian elite and their heathen opponents that lie at the core of the Kongo kingdom’s political mythology. In the new Brazilian context, however, heathenry is embodied in one of the battles by the figure of the Amerindian. The staged defeat of indigenous Brazilians to Christian Africans formed a remarkably ambiguous spectacle whose interpretation varied greatly depending on its viewers. In addition to the Kongo understanding of the mock battle, Europeans could interpret the surrendering of the Brazilian natives to central African Christians converted, in their view, thanks to Portuguese missionary zeal, as a celebration of Portugal’s colonial prowess on both shores of the Atlantic. As Lara demonstrated, for the Portuguese of Santo Amaro, this part of the festivities belonged to an established tradition in which processions of subjugated people celebrated royalty (Lara 2001, 76). The Santo Amaro choreography in this sense took the form of Iberian *Moros e Christianos* dances that enacted a Christian discourse of triumph over heathenry honed in the *Reconquista* and that became central to Iberian identity. The Santo Amaro variation on the theme of the victory of Christianity over heathenry starring Africans triumphing over Indians had direct precedents in Portugal. An almost identical show staged in 1760 to entertain

Lisbonite commoners and royalty before a bullfight appeared for example in an Italian travelogue of the time (Baretti 1770, 1:125–26). However, the Europeans in Bahia did not perceive and likely could not understand that this story also underlay Kongo political ideology. The *sangamentos* of Christian central Africa also enacted the fundamental narrative of a divinely endorsed origin of the Kongo kingdom in a victory over heathenry that Afonso had borrowed from Portugal and recast in the idiom of central African foundation myths.

The ability of visual discourses such as the Santo Amaro performances or the confraternity-sponsored festivals to weave multiple meanings into a single occurrence is a defining trait of colonial visual culture, whether the polysemy originates in the creation of the artwork or stems from the varying interpretations of its different publics. The fluid, multivalent meaning of colonial visual culture allowed the indigenous and African people under the rule of European administrations to express independent religious, political, and cultural ideas and values at odds with the dominant discourse of the colonial elite. The black king festivals operated in this manner. For the Portuguese elite, they were sometimes amusing, sometimes concerning, but ultimately innocuous manifestations that contributed to Christianization and the colonial project at large. For the black dancers, however, the celebrations of black royalty encompassed a significance that greatly surpassed their perceived nature by the authorities as simple cathartic events tolerated for the sake of social peace and for the contribution of their splendid celebrations to the prestige of the colonial lay and clerical authorities. In the Santo Amaro dances, the African warriors might have been understood as a proxy for the Portuguese conquest and evangelization of indigenous Brazilian populations, but the black characters of the performances also enacted and embodied a radically different political and historical discourse proper to central Africans. Conquering heathenry and celebrating Christian kingship talked to essential Kongo ideas of power and social identity.

Yet, the intersection of form between *sangamentos* and other Iberian festivities allowed the coronations to unfold in plain sight, in the streets and plazas of colonial cities and towns while other occurrences of collective singing and dancing among enslaved Africans took place secretly, far from the eyes and control of the colonial authorities. In officially sponsored festivities such as the Santo Amaro performances which the white goldsmith guild commissioned and controlled, as well as in the coronations staged in the more independent context of black confraternities, enslaved and free men and women identifying as central Africans found the means to embody their collective memory and enact a cultural identity in spite of close scrutiny and domination of colonial clerical and lay authorities.

Two written descriptions of election festivals in Pernambuco in 1666 and in Rio de Janeiro in 1748 demonstrate how the Santo Amaro celebrations closely resembled confraternity-sponsored festivals. In 1666 Pernambuco, French traveler Souchu de Rennefort described a crowd of black men and women celebrating their newly elected king and queen after Mass. With music, song, and dance they processed through the streets, dressed in gala with clothing the Frenchman thought to be borrowed from

their masters, combined with strings of gold necklaces and pearls. The chosen leaders then spent a week solemnly parading through the city with sword and dagger at the waist (Rennefort 1688, 204–5). In 1748 Rio de Janeiro, on the feast of the Epiphany, the ‘Brotherhood of the Saint King Balthazar’ came out in procession for the coronation of a king and queen of the central African ‘rebolo nation.’¹² The royal couple wore scarlet velvet coats with stars, and clothing scintillating with glitter and galloons. The king carried a golden scepter and the queen wore a diadem. Attendants sporting capes, swords, and elaborate headdresses carried the crowns (Moraes Filho 1901, 382–86). The displays of riches and swords recorded here are doubly significant. At one level, they showcase how the black king explicitly challenged colonial rules against people of color’s use of sartorial luxury and, of course, of weapons (Lara 1997, 205–7). At another level, however, swords and other conspicuous riches used in the festivals also talked to specific central African conceptions of power and prestige. First, the weapon recalled that European-inspired swords were one of the central African elite’s central insignia of power (Fromont 2011b). Second, the lavish festival’s financing echoed the Kongo rulers’ right to collect taxes and tribute, a privilege they exercised during ostentatious power rituals that often included the staging of a *sangamento*. Black kings in Brazil similarly gathered donations from their nation during the festivals. The modest offerings of the impoverished constituency streamed together and astonishingly financed the spectacular displays of luxury for which the coronations became famous.¹³ The collection and donation of riches formed an essential part of the confraternity and festival organization, recreating, to some extent, an important feature of the Kongo kingdom’s fiscal organization.

The comparison between the Brazilian black kings festivals and central African precedents holds true across all descriptions. In the American performances, enslaved Africans recalled and rearticulated specific aspects of the cultures from which they hailed to respond to new colonial circumstances. Beyond its social significance, the celebration of black kings outlines the intellectual response of people of central African origin or heritage to the experience of life at the lowest echelons of colonial society, free or enslaved. It tells us how they brought and preserved a sophisticated understanding of the nature, origins, and expression of power and prestige from central Africa to Brazil. It tells us how they rearticulated this knowledge in the face of altered circumstances in a manner that continued to afford them some level of social cohesion and political strength. It outlines how that knowledge—here as Connerton’s ‘collective memory’—was embodied, enacted, and passed on in the gestures, songs, sounds, choreography, and regalia of the festivals (Connerton 1989). Finally, it tells us about the negotiations and adaptations through which this knowledge evolved as it crossed the Atlantic, survived the social trauma of enslavement, and became colonial. In spite of the extreme violence that life in Brazil’s slave society imposed over all aspects of their bodies and minds, men and women of central African origins preserved through the Middle Passage and within the slavery system an independent

worldview that allowed them to respond to change and adapt to novelty from their own standpoint.

Becoming Brazilian: From Kongo to Congado

The coronation festivals in Brazil showcases central African practices and thought transformed from the outset in response to their actors' new colonial context. The conspicuous inclusion of queens alongside kings in the American pageantry or the occasional references to Angolan queen Njinga in the staged narratives are two examples of early change in performances that, over time, evolved from being theaters of memory transmission to sites of identity formation.¹⁴ If, dancing for their king, black men and women in Brazil originally enacted links to their central African places of origin, their dances eventually became a generative space in which they invented and heralded a new, distinct, Afro-Brazilian identity.

Two images from the nineteenth century illustrate the entwined paths of continuity and change that Kongo practices and symbolism followed in slavery-era Brazil as black men and women recast elements of their central African heritage into expressions of a new and increasingly significant Afro-Brazilian identity. Portuguese photographer Christiano Jr. produced around 1865 a set of photographs of black, and most often enslaved, people in Rio de Janeiro in a commercial venture that offered images of local color for sale to visitors.¹⁵ He promoted for instance his 'black types' in a newspaper advertisement as 'very appropriate for who returns to Europe' (Azevedo and Lisovsky 1988, xii). Among these photographs featured one of a group of black men and women in festive regalia¹⁶ (Figure 8). The shot is obviously staged. The hands of the drummers are still, the dancer's arms are along their bodies, everybody's feet are anchored to the ground. The joyful character of the election festivals it likely sought to document eludes the viewer. There is no music, no dance, and certainly no celebration. The members of the group look grim, their eyes often cast down or away from the camera. Their outfits alone suggest the lively festivals described above, with their mix of adorned loincloth and crowns, elaborate headdresses and feathers. The technical requirements of early photography explain in large part the eerie stillness of the group. Yet, the image remains strikingly unreadable. The derelict wall of cracked plaster and crumbling bricks behind the assembled men and women offers more of itself than the obviously reluctant participants in this failed snapshot of local folklore. Because the photograph narrowed the scene's audience to the Portuguese photographer and his European clients, the instruments, insignia, and finery of the group remained mere spectacle rather than a vibrant enactment of collective memory and identity. The photograph nonetheless offers a precious view of the heirs to the black king festivals of the colonial era. The men and women of the mid nineteenth century, dressed as if to stage the election shine in a showy mix of fashionable finery and accessories recalling the pageantry observed in centuries past.¹⁷ Crinolines, drums, bright crowns, and loincloths update and perpetuate the election festivals, now known as *danças dos*



Figure 8 Christiano Jr. 'Congado group.' Circa 1865. Photograph, 9 × 6 cm. Central Archive of the IPHAN–Section Rio de Janeiro: Collection Christiano Jr.

Congos, *Congado*, or *Congada* and considered by outside observers as age-old manifestations of black Brazilian lore (Andrade 1959).

Christiano Jr. also shot a studio photograph of the man standing closest to the women on the right of the outdoors image. We easily recognize him from his large forehead, deeply lined cheeks perhaps from scarifications, and neatly groomed beard (Figure 9). In this *carte de visite* portrait the photographer composed as part of his commercial series of picturesque types, the man does not wear his festival outfit. Instead, he appears in a combination of clothing and accessories that amount to the full regalia of the Kongo elite. Like the seventeenth-century Kongo *cavaliere* in



Figure 9 Christiano Jr. 'African Man in Rio de Janeiro.' Circa 1865. Photograph, 9 × 6 cm. Central Archive of the IPHAN–Section Rio de Janeiro: Collection Christiano Jr.

Figure 10, he stands proudly one arm on the hip and the other extended, a cap of status on the head, his lower body dressed in a colorful wrapper adorned on the front with an animal pelt. While Africans from many parts of the continent eagerly used bright European fabrics and exotic imports in the nineteenth century, the outfit of the man in Figure 9 is specifically Kongo. The pelt and the high bonnet in particular are unmistakable items of central African regalia. The beads around his neck, the pommel and the dark, probably red belt at his waist are further details that belong to central African elite sartorial practices attested since the early modern period and still in use in mid-nineteenth century Kongo and Angola. European visitors to regions once under the purview of the kingdom of Kongo, such as Father Carrie traveling in the 1870s in the coastal area of Soyo, observed the use of regalia similar to that of the man in the Brazilian photograph and reminiscent of the *cavaliere's* in Figure 10; he noted for instance the 'bonnet' of status, 'golden braids,' 'brightly colored loincloth,' and European-style coats of the elite men he encountered (Carrie 1878, 473).

The items used in the clothing showcased in the Brazilian photograph reflect the material environment in which the African man dwelled in the Western hemisphere;



Figure 10 'Seventeenth-century Kongo nobles.' Print in Girolamo Merolla da Sorrento and Angelo Piccardo, *Breve, e succinta relatione del viaggio nel Regno di Congo nell' Africa meridionale*. Naples: F. Mollo, 1692. Plate 14 (photograph courtesy of the Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Northwestern University).

his hat is of velvet rather than the raffia fiber of Kongo caps of status, the pommel peeking out at his waist is more likely an umbrella than a sword, and his wrapper is attached on top of frayed shirt and pants. Each piece, however, efficiently emulates its

African counterpart. It is possible that the man had recently disembarked from central Africa; the scarifications on his face suggest he did. His attitude and clothing in any case make clear that he possessed a vivid and precise knowledge of central African sartorial practices and political insignia.

The contrast between this outfit and the one he wears as part of the *Congado* group is striking. In one case, the man's clothing creatively recreated with the means of an enslaved person the exact regalia of central Africa. In the other, the festive costume stems from a centuries-old tradition of cultural reinvention born of the negotiation between men and women wishing to celebrate their attachment to a nation in Brazil linked to central Africa and the oppressive political and social system at the bottom of which they lived. On the one hand, the proud poser poignantly juxtaposed make-do Kongo regalia over the frayed clothes of an enslaved man. On the other hand, the same man and other members of his American nation sport outfits that not only evoke central Africa in specific items of regalia but also manifest a long history of their own within Brazil. The difference between the two outfits, the symbolic distance between dressing up as a Kongo elite and dressing up for the election of the King of Congo or the *congada*, maps the historical itinerary along which central African epistemological resilience engendered Afro-Brazilian identity.

The man's presence in both photographs under two different guises thus illustrates the role that the black confraternities and election festivals played as intellectual platforms for the formulation, dissemination, and transmission of Afro-Brazilian knowledge in the interrelated realms of religion, visual culture, and socio-political organization. The associations offered support and companionship, and served as spaces in which, over generations, enslaved and free men and women reflected upon and honed responses to colonial customs and realities. Newly arrived members enlivened the links to Africa of the Brazilian nations they joined, contributing to the long and cumulative process through which memories of Africa became building blocks of Afro-Brazilian identities.

Conclusion

The music, dance, and regalia of black kings festivals temporarily lifted the bodies of enslaved and free men and women of slavery-era Brazil from the grip of a life of bondage or subaltern social standing. During the performances, the participants enacted social, political, and religious conceptions that dwelled outside the totalizing reach of the colonial and slavery projects. Black kings festivals created not only a space of resistance and opposition but also, and more importantly, one in which independent ideas endured and grew. In the performances men and women identifying with central African heritage enacted in plain view, yet outside the understanding and reach of colonial administrations, their own conceptions of identity, history, power, and social unity. Restaging and reshaping ideas and performances honed in the Kongo with the advent of Christianity, enslaved central Africans not only preserved the memory of their region of origins, but also crafted

empowered responses to enslavement and the colonial system at large. The Brazilian festivals, compared and contrasted to their African precedents, outline the potent intellectual response of central Africans to the experience of enslavement.

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Notes

- ¹ Significant studies in Portuguese and English not quoted elsewhere in this article include the earlier works of Mulvey 1976, Scarano 1976, Boschi 1986, Karasch 1987, Reis 1991 as well as more recent scholarship by Heywood 2002 and Borges 2005.
- ² I use the word heritage here to stress that the complex worldview that I refer to with the epithet of 'central African' could be learned in Brazil too.
- ³ The ability to join the associations varied among men and women, free and enslaved, due to each group's ability to pay the membership dues. Women and the freed were more likely to have the time and money to join. Elective positions were also often reserved to the free by rule or de facto ability to pay the even steeper fees. See for example Soares 2000, ch 5.
- ⁴ IANTT, Chancelaria, Legitimações de D. Sebastião, Liv. 38, fi. 17v, 16 dez. 1563 cited in Azevedo (1903, 306).
- ⁵ Information on the images appears in the introduction to a facsimile, Julião, Cunha et al. (1960).
- ⁶ The forty-two images of Brazil have been published in the 1960 facsimile.
- ⁷ Carlos Julião. *Four Ports Panorama*. Eighteenth-century watercolor on paper, 0.828 × 0.504 cm. In Lisbon: *Gabinete de Estudos Arqueológicos de Engenharia Militar/Direcção de Infra-Estruturas* (Reg. 8757, cota 4757-3-38-52), published in color in Lara (2007). I was able to determine the composition of the posters as a collage of cut-out watercolors while examining them in person in the summer of 2011. I wish to thank the staff of the *Gabinete* for their assistance.
- ⁸ See the image of the king of Kongo in the frontispiece of António de Oliveira de Cadornega's 1680 manuscript *Historia Geral das Guerras Angolanas*, in Lisbon's *Academia das Ciencias*, MS Vermelho 77 or in the mid-seventeenth-century poster in the *Museo Francese dei Frati Cappuccini* in Rome published in Fromont (2011a).
- ⁹ Lara (2001, 75) quotes a description of the festivities published the same year and under the same title as a better known text (1763) that I have not been able to consult in person, describing the dancers 'com vestido nu fingindo a África.'
- ¹⁰ Tinhorão (2000) studied a range of festivals in colonial Brazil involving white and black participants.
- ¹¹ My translation purposely remains close to Calmon's text in order to maintain the original emphasis.
- ¹² Lopes (2003, 193) gives a definition of *rebolo*.
- ¹³ Souza (2002, 216–17) gives additional examples of the luxuries showcased in the festivals. The donations also served for the manumission of some confraternity members (Mulvey 1976, 105, 124).

- ¹⁴ An early mention of queen 'Xinga' alongside the king of Congo and of the word 'congada' appears for example in von Martius's observations in Minas Gerais in 1818 (Spix and von Martius 1823–1830, 2:468–69).
- ¹⁵ José Christiano de Freitas Henriques Junior, born in 1832 in the Açores, is best known for his work in Brazil between 1862 and 1866, and in Argentina from 1867 to his death in 1903 (Lago and Lago 2005, 131–41).
- ¹⁶ Another photograph, signed by Arsenio da Silva, a little-known photographer, captured the same scene (Lago and Lago 2005, 140).
- ¹⁷ A central African axe similar to that in Figure 3 is visible in Arsenio's image.

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